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AUTHOR Johannessen, Larry R.
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ABSTRACT

To help improve students' ability to interpret and write about literature, teachers should get rid of old habits. The old habits include giving quizzes to make sure students read assignments, and assigning readings just because particular works are part the literary canon. Once a teacher assigns a novel and gives a quiz, everything the teacher and students do with the novel is going to be colored by the quiz habit. Students will have difficulty writing about a character, a theme, or the author's use of some literary device. If the teacher announces that there will be a composition assignment on a novel instead of an objective test, students will complain that other classes are just taking tests. To change old habits, teachers need to think about what they are doing in the classroom and why. They need to give serious thought to expanding the literary canon to include literature that is more appropriate and engaging to students. It would also be helpful to introduce literary works in ways that will prepare students for themes, issues, concepts and characters. Literature should also be connected to students' lives through writing. Such techniques can help bring literature alive for students. (Thirteen references are attached.) (SG)

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Enhancing Student Response to Literature: A Matter of Changing Old Habits

Opening Institute Dinner Speech

Larry R. Johannessen
Program Director and Keynote Speaker

Assistant Professor of English
Saint Xavier College
3700 W. 103rd Street
Chicago, Illinois 60655
(312) 779-3300, Ext 249
Fax *(312) 779-9061

for
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I've never given a dinner talk before, and I was more than a little nervous about it; so, to get ready for this occassion, I started re-reading all of those national reports, studies, and books by important scholars that came out during the 1980's telling us about teaching and learning, and in particular those concerned with literature and writing. You know the ones I mean; all of those reports that told us what students knew, but more often what they didn't know and should know; what they could do, but much more often what they couldn't do and should be able to do; what students could read, but much more likely what they couldn't read and should be reading; what we in secondary education knew, but a lot more about what we didn't

know; what we were doing right in the classroom, but one heck of a lot more about what we were doing wrong.

As I read over these reports, studies, and books, I came to the realization that while most of the nation was enjoying an economic boom during the 1980's, those of us in secondary education, particularly English education and the teaching and learning of literature and writing, were under constant attack; we were experiencing in economic terms, if not a "full-fledged depression," then at least a "deep recession." In a word, it was tough times for us.

In addition, as I read over these documents in search of the important conclusions and recommendations that I might discuss this evening, I had another insight about the various prescriptions or formulas contained in these documents for fixing the terrible state of secondary education, particularly the teaching of English: Despite all of the calls for restructuring the schools, the school year, the school day, the curriculum, and teaching what everyone needs to know, I think most of these reports, studies, and books may miss the most important and simple step that can be taken to help improve our students' ability to interpret and write about literature--What I am talking about is changing some of our *old habits*--old habits that we do mostly without thinking and that prevent us from providing the kind of instruction that could really teach our students important strategies and skills that would enable them to interprete and write about literature with much greater sophistication and skill than most are able to now.

What do I mean by old habits? Let me start with an example that I think everyone can relate to: the now traditional "Reading Quiz." You know what I mean, the quiz consisting of usually ten multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and/or short answer questions, although sometimes maybe only five

questions, and on occassion perhaps as many as fifteen or even twenty questions (notice the questions are always in multiples of five to make for easy grading). These questions are based on the reading assignment given for last night's homework--for example, "Class, I want you to read pages one through nineteen (the first four chapters) of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for tomorrow." Usually most or all of these questions focus on simple recall, literal level, and/or plot type questions.

One question that immediately comes to mind is, why am I giving a quiz on *Huck Finn* in the first place? Quite simply because I'm afraid my students won't read it. And, why won't they read it? Well, this brings me to another old habit: the habit of choosing literature for the curriculum because it is part of the literary canon. Now, don't get me wrong, here. I'm not saying we shouldn't teach *Huck Finn*. In fact, according to a 1989 survey by Applebee, it has been among the most commonly read books in American secondary schools for much of the Twentieth Century, ranking as the third most frequently taught novel. No, what I am suggesting here is that having taught this book many times to secondary students, I know from experience that in part because of Twain's use of dramatic irony, it is very difficult to engage most students in the novel. They do not seem to want to read it. Yet, I have taught it, year after year, because it is part of the canon, because it is great literature, because I love the work (or more correctly I use to love it before I taught it), and because I read it when I was in high school (or at least I think I did). My point here is that my quizzing habit is in part based on another old habit: that of teaching certain literature without ever asking if this literature is really appropriate for my students.

I think a short anecdote might help clarify this point. I taught eleventh grade American literature every year during my twelve years of

high school teaching. During my first five years, I listened to my colleagues moan and groan about all of the difficulties they were having with *Huck Finn.* "The kids hate it," some proclaimed. "No matter what I do, they just don't get it," others concluded. "Most never finish it," still others pointed out. Yet, year in and year out, when it came time to decide what works of literature we were going to teach the following year, no one ever suggested that we replace *Huck Finn* with some other work. Finally, during my sixth year of teaching, I decided to try to do something about it. I sat quietly during our meeting following the teaching of *Huck Finn* as my colleagues went through the litany of complaints about how badly the novel had gone, again. When they had all finished, I said, "Every year I sit here and listen to all of you make the same complaints about *Huck Finn,* so if it goes this badly every year, why don't we just cut it from the curriculum? I'm sure we can find something more appropriate and engaging for these students to read." Well, it was as if I had suggested that we invite Jeffrey Dahmer or Saddham Hussein to teach English at our school. Suggesting that we cut *Huck Finn* from the curriculum was tantamount to blasphemy. My colleagues pounced on me from all directions. How dare I even suggest such a thing! There were three teachers on the committee who would not speak to me for three years because of what I had suggested. And, if I have offended anyone in the audience, I apologize. What is important here with this anecdote is that it wasn't until years later that I realized the **real** reason why my colleagues became so upset when I suggested getting rid of *Huck Finn,* and why they would not even consider cutting it from the curriculum: underneath all the logical arguments for keeping it in the curriculum is the real reason--**habit**.

Now, don't misunderstand me: I am not attacking the idea of teaching great literature or giving quizzes. Most students probably should read some

great literature. And there are certainly times when a quiz can be a valuable and necessary tool for learning and assessment. The trouble is that most of us give quizzes without thinking about why we are giving them, and most importantly, we don't think about what the effect of giving them will be, especially over a long period of time. Sure, we give quizzes, lots and lots of quizzes, because they are easy to grade, because they *force* (notice I said "force") students to do the reading (or so we think), and because students, parents, colleagues, administrators, and board members may expect us to give quizzes. But, deep down underneath these reasons is *the* reason we give quizzes--**habit**--pure and simple, **habit.** We give quizzes primarily because we have always given quizzes. We don't think much about quizzes in terms of their value in helping students learn to interpret literature or to measure how well they have learned some interpretive skill or strategy. It is an old habit that most of us learned long before we started teaching; we actually learned it when we were students and our teachers gave us lots and lots of quizzes because they had always given quizzes and they too probably first learned it when they were students.

You see how this works? It is an old, old habit that goes way back. Sometimes we do it without thinking, without question, and we do it because it has always been that way, because it is the way we do things at this school, and etc. etc.

Well, what is wrong with quizzes? There is nothing inherently wrong with quizzes. But consider this: Once I give that quiz on chapters one through four of *Huck Finn,* then what do I do when I assign chapters five through eight? Well, I have already set up certain expectations for my students and for my instruction. The students think that what is important is doing the reading or knowing the plot--I have told them that by my first

quiz. And, what would happen if, when they walked in the door of class after reading chapters five through eight, I asked them to write a short composition telling me what they thought or felt about some of the characters in the novel? Well, you know what would happen--"What do you mean Mr. J, you didn't tell us to think about anything, you just told us to read it." Or, "That's not fair Mr. J., I stayed up late reading these chapters so I would know what happened in the book." And, what about the students who just read the *Cliff's Notes*? You know, they are sitting there getting very nervous. So, rather than fight this battle, I give another quiz just like the first one, and then when we get to reading chapters nine through twelve, I repeat the process and so on until the novel is finished.

Once I have established this pattern of quizzing students on a literal understanding of the novel, everything I do with the novel, everything I ask students to do with it is going to be colored by the quiz habit. If I ask them to write about a character, theme, or the author's use of some literary device, chances are they are going to start by telling me the story, and many of them are going to have difficulty going much further than that. Why? Because that is what they think is important because I told them it was important again and again with each quiz I gave them.

Once the novel is finished we have a new problem, and here is where the quiz habit begins to have implications far beyond what I may have intended. When I sit down to create a test or some kind of writing or other assignment that will assess their understanding of the novel, I am caught in a bind. If I give them a writing assignment on the novel requiring them to do some new interpretation, then I know they are probably going to have trouble. Why? Because the emphasis of my previous instruction has been on a literal understanding of the story, on recall, on the plot and in order for

them to be successful on the assignment, I know that I will have to do additional work with students on the novel to prepare them for it. Also, if I do give this assignment, I may get some complaints from my students, perhaps from colleagues who teach the same novel and gave an objective test, and perhaps from parents and/or administrators. Besides, I think to myself, it would be real easy to make up an objective test using questions from all of the quizzes I gave them. So, rather than take the extra time and risks necessary to give students an assignment that I know will be valuable, I create an objective test on the novel.

The problem here is that my quizzing habit feeds into another habit that is just as old: the "objective" test habit. And consider this: Even though I may think I'm asking my students to analyze the novel, it turns out that all or nearly all of my questions on this test are literal level or recall, fill-in-the-blank, multiple-choice, and short answer questions. In fact, in a 1984 study, Benjamin Bloom reports that despite the recent emphasis on teaching higher-order thinking and interpretive strategies, over 95 percent of the test questions that American students respond to elicit answers at the informational level. In 1990, Elizabeth Kahn conducted a case study of the ways teachers evaluate student learning in sophomore English at a Midwestern suburban high school. Her findings are consistent with Bloom's results. In fact, after reading these two studies, I examined the last objective test that my colleagues on my teaching committee gave to our students. Typical of the 100 multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, true-false, and short answer questions on the test are the following:

> Short Answer: 72. The name of the scandalous show which the King and Duke put on for three nights in

Bricksville was The _____ _____.

(two words--Answer: Royal Nonesuch).

Or, how about the following multiple-choice question:

21. Mrs. Judith Loftus discovered

A. Huck's real name.

B. the location of Huck's boat.

C. that Huck was a boy.

(Answer: C. that Huck was a boy.)

Again, nearly all of the questions on this test were indeed like the two examples I just gave you--recall of information given in the text. And the point here is that my "objective" test reinforces the message that what is important in studying this work of literature and perhaps any work of literature is knowing the plot or having a literal understanding of what I asked them to read, and this kind of test certaintly does not help my students learn how to interpret and write about literature.

But what about teachers who go against the flow and try to break out of these old habits? Aren't they praised by colleagues and administrators? Don't parents call the school reporting what great things their children are doing in Mr. or Ms. X's class? Well, not necessarily. Why? Because students and parents, as well as teachers, are often firmly committed to old habits. You've already seen what happened to me when I attempted to convince my colleagues to drop *Huck Finn* from the curriculum--the old canon habit very quickly shifted into fifth gear and left me sitting in the dust. And the situation is sometimes not much different with regard to quizzes and tests. I

vividly remember when I announced to my classes that they would be writing a composition on a novel (instead of taking an objective test). They came to class the next day armed and ready: "It's not fair Mr. J. All the other classes are taking an objective test," they argued vehemently.

As we define knowledge in more complex, sophisticated ways, learning becomes more difficult and hence more risky. There is less direct control. And that can be scary for teachers and students alike. Teachers who reject old habits may have to defend their use of "unorthodox" texts or methods. They may be frowned upon by colleagues. They may be questioned by students and parents.

Why hasn't the situation improved very much? The answer, I think, is that old habits die hard. I think Mark Twain said it best: "Habit is habit," he writes, "and not to be flung out the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs a step at a time (1964, 51).

The truth is that if we want to teach our students how to comprehend, interpret, and write about what they read in our classrooms, then we have to start "coaxing" some of our old habits "downstairs." How can we do this? First, we need to be more aware of, to think about, what we are doing in the classroom and why. We assume, for example, that if we do not give quizzes on the readings we assign that students will not read. The truth is, however, that there are a variety of strategies and techniques we might use to encourage our students to read that in most cases will probably work better than the threat of a failing grade on a quiz. For example, some teachers report that giving students class time to complete part of their reading assignments significantly increases the likelihood that they will continue and finish the reading outside of class. Yet, some teachers I know would never consider this strategy. They tell me that class time is not for reading. It is

for more important things. What? Important things like giving quizzes? This attitude is very troubling. It suggests that reading isn't important or isn't as important as other things? But, if one of our goals in English is to encourage students to read and to help them acquire a life-long habit of reading, then shouldn't we be providing class time for this important activity? In fact, shouldn't we be modeling the reading habit in our classrooms for students? In other words, there are good, logical reasons for this practice, and incorporating this strategy into our teaching could help us overcome the old quizzing habit.

In addition, we might give some serious thought to expanding the literary canon to include literature that may be more appropriate and engaging to students. In fact, this is one of the central recommendations of the English Coalition Conference that met during the summer of 1987 (Lloyd-Jones and Lunsford 1989). If we ask our students to read literature that is appropriate and engaging, then they will be more likely to read, and there won't be much of a reason to give them quizzes and tests to "force" them to read.

Another thing we might do to overcome some of our old habits is to introduce literary works in ways that will prepare students for the themes, issues, concepts, and characters they will encounter and that will motivate them to read. Research has shown that certain kinds of introductory activities can have a powerful effect on student engagement and comprehension even with very difficult literature (Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern, 1987).

Finally, another way we might overcome some of our old habits is to connect literature to students' lives through writing. Sometimes we view literature and writing in a one dimensional fashion, as a kind of written

examination of what students can tell us about a text. We sometimes forget that there are a variety of ways that we might use writing as a means to bring literature alive for students.

Beginning tomorrow morning with Steven Tchudi's keynote address, at each of the workshops offered by the institute team, and at the follow-up general session tomorrow afternoon, you are going to hear about and participate in some exciting instruction designed to teach students how to comprehend, interpret, and write about literature in a variety of ways. We'll share some things we've done to "coax" some of our old habits "downstairs," and hope that what we have to show you will be helpful to you in your teaching.

On behalf of the workshop team, I bid you welcome and we look forward to working with all of you tomorrow.

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